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SOVIET NAVAL STRATEGY?

by

JAMES JOHN TRITTEN

AUGUST 1987

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Prepared for:  
Director, Net Assessment  
Office of the Secretary of Defense  
Washington, D.C. 20301

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SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1a REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED			1b RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS	
2a SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY			3 DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited	
2b DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE				
4 PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S) NPS-56-87-010			5 MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)	
6a NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION Naval Postgraduate School		6b OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) Code 56		7a NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION
6c ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Monterey, CA 93943-5100			7b ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)	
8a NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION Director, Net Assessment		8b OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable)		9 PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER
8c ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Office of the Secretary of Defense Washington, D.C. 20301			10 SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS	
			PROGRAM ELEMENT NO MIPR	PROJECT NO DWAM
11 TITLE (Include Security Classification) SOVIET NAVAL STRATEGY?				
12 PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) James J. Tritten				
13a TYPE OF REPORT FINAL REPORT		13b TIME COVERED FROM AUG 86 TO AUG 87		14 DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month Day) 1987 AUGUST 18
15 PAGE COUNT 12				
16 SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION Edited version to appear in <u>Naval Forces</u> in 1987				
17 COSATI CODES			18 SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) Soviet Navy      Soviet Military Strategy	
FIELD	GROUP	SUB-GROUP		
19 ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)  Report addresses concept of Soviet military doctrine and assesses recent Soviet literature discussion of a "theory" of the Navy. Author concludes that under Soviet military doctrine, there is only one military strategy and that an independent naval strategy does not exist.				
20 DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS			21 ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED	
22a NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL James J. Tritten, Chairman, NSA			22b TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) (408) 646-2521/2949	22c OFFICE SYMBOL Code 56Tr



## SOVIET NAVAL STRATEGY?

Commander James J. Tritten USN

Since there is an American and a NATO maritime strategy, it is often assumed that the Soviet Union also has its own maritime or naval strategy. Whether or not the USSR has, or should have a separate maritime or naval strategy, has long been the subject of debate in both Western and Soviet literature.<sup>1</sup>

Under the category of Soviet military science, debate is permissible on questions of military strategy, military art, operational art, and tactics. Such a debate took place on the pages of the main Soviet Navy journal, Morskoy Sbornik, from April 1981 through July 1983. This exchange of ideas is worth scrutinizing in order to gain some insight into the Soviet military and the opinions of the new head of their navy, Admiral V. N. Chernavin. Both Chernavin and Fleet Admiral S. G. Gorshkov, then Commander-in-Chief, were participants.

A main issue in this open exchange of views was the degree of relative independence that naval warfare should have in Soviet military science. Could the navy have its own "strategy" or would it be limited to a less specific but separate "theory" which all services were allowed? A theory of the navy, as part of military science, would allow the navy to discuss hypotheses about warfare that exceed the parameters of the strategies approved by the General Staff. These types of questions are not unfamiliar to us in the West; we too, often debate and discuss the role of command and control of naval forces that are acting in support of campaigns ashore; or the relationship of our maritime strategies to overall national or allied military strategies.

Ever since he headed the Soviet Navy, Admiral Gorshkov wrote that the navy should have a significant role in deciding the roles and missions of his fleet, to include when operations were "joint" or combined the efforts of more



than one service. The Admiral often stated that the command and control of military forces, other than naval, in distant oceanic theaters of military operations, should be conducted primarily by naval commanders rather than by the marshals ashore.

Despite his advocacy of some naval independence, Gorshkov embraced the concept of a unified single military strategy at least as early as 1966.<sup>2</sup> By 1979, which saw the second edition of his The Sea Power of the State, Gorshkov made it extremely clear that although there could only be one unified military strategy for the employment of all military forces, there had to be options for the strategic employment of certain types of forces that operated in more unique environments. Additionally, the Admiral argued that under a combined arms doctrine of warfare, one service should not be allowed to dominate any particular sphere of military affairs.

In April and May of 1981, a two part article authored by one of the Soviet Navy's leading theoreticians, Vice Admiral K. Stalbo, appeared in Morskoy Sbornik.<sup>3</sup> Stalbo, as a frequent contributor to the journal, was acknowledged by Admiral Gorshkov as having provided assistance in the preparation and review of the Sea Power of the State. The Stalbo articles are required reading for students of both naval warfare and the relationship of fleets to a nation's entire military effort. Some of the major points made by Stalbo were:

- (1) There is only one uniform military strategy, not a separate and unique strategy for the navy.
- (2) The navy can influence the course of a future war, primarily due to weapons carried aboard nuclear missile submarines.
- (3) A future war would likely be global, involve all mediums, and might be protracted.
- (4) The planned strategic employment of the fleet determines its roles and missions.
- (5) In a future war, a navy must attack an enemy's main and most heavily defended forces.

Stalbo went on to define naval art as a subdivision of military art, being composed of: a theory of the strategic employment of the navy, and theories of naval operational art and naval tactics. The former provides a framework for the discussion of the necessity for a navy and what a nation might expect that navy to accomplish. In Stalbo's words, the strategic employment of the navy will accomplish the naval portion of the overall combined arms objectives under the framework of a unified military strategy. Operational art and tactics define how navies will operate in order to carry out missions in war at the operational or tactical level.

The Admiral was careful to distance himself from "Mahanists" in the West who overstress the importance of naval warfare and "sea supremacy." Stalbo clearly fell in line with the general premise of Soviet military doctrine that there must be a proper balance between all types of military forces. He also repudiated the use of the term "naval strategy" and emphasized that the resources allocated to navies will be determined by the overall needs of the military as a whole and the role assigned to the navy under unified doctrine and strategy.

As with the case of the dog that did not bark, it is important to note that Stalbo did not use this opportunity, when discussing the major theories of military science, to argue that navies can "win" wars or even influence the outcome of a war or the armed conflict portion of the overall war effort. Stalbo simply argues that navies can influence the course of a war.

Over the next two years, the Stalbo articles were followed by seven others that discussed, expanded upon, or debated the major points that he made. The first of these was authored by Rear-Admiral G. Kostev, head of the naval faculty at the Lenin Political-Military Academy.<sup>4</sup> Kostev argued for a

separate "theory of the navy," since, in his view, naval warfare was conducted in a peculiar medium and had some missions that were purely "naval" (such as disruption of the sea lines of communication or the conduct of antisubmarine or antisurface warfare in remote ocean regions). Kostev's arguments were not unlike those expressed by naval officers in the West; with the implication that command and control of fleet assets is best left to professional naval officers.

Admiral V. N. Chernavin, who later relieved Admiral Gorshkov as head of the Soviet Navy, authored the second follow-on article in the series.<sup>5</sup> Then the Chief of the Main Navy Staff, Chernavin suggested that Stalbo may have overemphasized the importance of naval warfare and had not adequately addressed the requirements of a combined arms approach to warfare under one unified military strategy. Considering that Stalbo did stress these points, it seems proper to conclude that Chernavin used his article to distance himself from Stalbo and further identify himself with those political-military leaders in the USSR who were advocating a combined arms approach to warfare.

Admiral V. Sysoyev, Commander of the Marshal Grechko Naval Academy, authored the next article in the series.<sup>6</sup> This article also stressed the unified nature of Soviet military strategy and the Soviet combined arms approach. A fourth article, by Captain 1st Rank B. Makeyev, indirectly criticized Stalbo, by again stressing the top-down approach to the acquisition of naval weapons systems, in a very systematic, almost cybernetic process.<sup>7</sup> Makeyev sketched out an acquisition process that takes as inputs the overall political guidance, the realities of economic constraints, the roles and missions of other services in the maritime theaters, and the likely enemy, prior to the development of any program to acquire armaments. Makeyev's



article is a "must" for all strategic planners and those interested in a systemic approach to acquisition.

Rear-Admiral V. Gulin and Captain 1st Rank Yu. Borisov collaborated in a fifth article in the series that once again stressed unified military strategy, but this time with some ideological overtones.<sup>8</sup> The sixth article in the series was authored by Admiral V. Ponikarovsky, Director of the Naval College.<sup>9</sup> Ponikarovsky tended to agree with most of Stalbo's original points and expanded the discussion to a need for a theory of forces control.

The seventh article in the follow-on debate was authored by Captain 1st Rank V. Shlomin.<sup>10</sup> Shlomin made the strongest case of all of the authors for a unified single military strategy. It was the only article that was individually criticized by Admiral Gorshkov when he ended the debate in July 1983 with a final article entitled "Questions of the Theory of the Navy."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the extreme position of Captain Shlomin gave Gorshkov the strawman he needed to criticize the more extreme proponents of a "unified" approach to warfare.

In the final article, Gorshkov attempted to build a consensus around the basic points that had been originally raised by Stalbo. The then commander of the navy stated that the economic potential of the state limited the types of weapons systems which could be built and that the actual weapons on hand limited the types of strategies that could be developed. Gorshkov also explained that it was political needs that determined the role and missions for the armed forces and that although those roles and missions could be debated under military science, they would then be promulgated by a single unified military strategy.

Gorshkov further explained that the navy, like all of the military services in the USSR, was allowed to have its own theory of the navy as a part of the overall military science; i.e. independent theory could be debated but there was no independent naval strategy under a combined arms approach to warfare. Although the navy could have an independent operational art and tactics, these were subordinate to overall military art. Gorshkov did argue that in remote ocean regions of the world, naval operational art should guide combined arms military operations. Figure (1) outlines these concepts.

In ending the debate, the admiral made as strong a case as he could, given the constraints of Soviet military thought, for the unique character of certain aspects of naval warfare. He also stressed that navies have remained important in the modern era. He did not state that navies could win the war, or even the armed conflict portion of a war, or even influence the outcome of either. Gorshkov praised the flag officers who had contributed to the debate and noted that the discussion on the pages of Morskoj Sbornik was very useful and important.

What is the significance of these articles? First, it is that a degree of debate is permissible under Soviet military science and that this debate often takes place in the open literature. Debate begins with a clearly recognizable signal (i.e. the Stalbo articles) and ends with the firm shutting of a door (i.e. the Gorshkov piece). This suggests that the available Soviet literature should be collected and analyzed using rigorous content analysis. Proper accounting should be made as to the appearance and repetition of themes over time, the authority of the author, the medium, and the intended audience. By performing such analysis, we have an opportunity to gain insight into the Russian mind and to better identify and thus understand the differences in the way in which major political-military issues are approached.<sup>12</sup>

From such analysis, it is possible to set the significance of major statements into context; i.e. Chernavin's orthodoxy in light of his subsequent promotion. Similarly, we can construct Soviet "declaratory" theories, strategies, policies, etc., or what it is that they are openly trying to communicate externally or internally.

Secondly, the basic principles of military doctrine and strategy that were contained in the original Stalbo articles were not challenged by the debate and were reaffirmed by Gorshkov at its end. Hence, to understand the naval and maritime aspects of Soviet military doctrine and strategy, we in the West must read what the Politburo leaders, the Ministry of Defense, and the marshals have to say; if we read only the admirals, we will not grasp major points on the possible strategic objectives in a future war.

For example, if we are to search for evidence that the Soviets might use their nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine fleet for inter or post-war bargaining and negotiations, then one should expect to find references in the literature to navies having the ability to influence the outcome of wars or armed conflicts. The last time that Gorshkov stated this was in 1979<sup>13</sup>. None of the Ministers of Defense or heads of the Politburo has ever seconded this claim nor did any of the participants in this recent debate.

In the series on naval theory, the character of a future war was not debated. Stalbo claimed that it would "assume a global character" and that it might "last from several weeks to a month or more." We need to search through the Soviet literature to see if this is what is being said by those senior to the participants. In doing so, we should be able to uncover if this is indeed current military doctrine or whether or not it is part of an on-going debate in which the navy is using such arguments to justify existing, or even an

expanded portion of defense resources. Such analysis may give us insight into the character of military strategy; if future war is characterized under doctrine as likely being long, then strategies to execute long wars will logically be developed. Without cross-checking, one can only speculate.

Although one might have assumed that Admiral Chernavin, a submariner, would have used his article to champion the role of submarines, it was Stalbo who performed this role. Stalbo accorded the primary strategic effort of fleets to the nuclear-powered strategic missile submarine and for warfare conducted against them. For example, Admiral Stalbo stated that the destruction of a single Trident ballistic missile submarine was a strategic objective in itself. In Soviet terminology, strategic objectives have the highest possible status, since their attainment can have an impact on the war as a whole or in a particular theater of military operations. Stalbo further stated that "it would be erroneous to underestimate the theory of strategic employment of fleets having submarine nuclear-missile systems as the basis of their combat might."

Stalbo also said that in a future war, a navy must attack an enemy's main and most heavily defended forces. This is classic Mahan although no Russian naval officer would readily admit to this. One can interpret Stalbo's comments to mean either that the Russians intend their military forces to engage the most heavily defended high value units in enemy navies (including ballistic missile submarines); or that they expect that their enemies will do the same to them. Both interpretations are probably correct.

Gorshkov's final article, which ended the debate, reaffirmed Stalbo's leading place accorded to sea-based strategic nuclear systems as well as combat against such systems. Over the years, Gorshkov has tended to overstate



the potential contributions that the fleet in general, or submarines in particular, could make to a future war. Admiral Chernavin, in his initial statements as the head of the Soviet Navy has, on the other hand, adopted the position that naval strategic nuclear forces are but a part of the overall nuclear triad which also includes the strategic rocket forces and strategic aviation.<sup>14</sup>

There is a temptation to adopt the position that as long as the USSR has a navy and thinks about how it will employ this navy in wartime, it must also have a a naval strategy. Rather than make this presumption, we should take the Russians at their word, and recognize that, for them, it is important to repudiate an independent naval strategy. If we are going to better understand how the marshals and admirals will fight in a future war, we had better attempt to determine how they look at warfare theory.

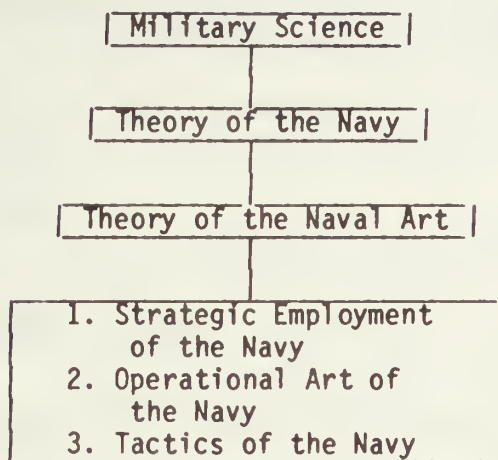
Simply put, if the Russians insist that there is no independent naval strategy, we must find out why and get the best perspective that we can on how they intend to fight. Soviet military authorities do not use the term "strategic", for example, to describe types of weapons like is done in the west; Soviet strategic weapons are not simply those that have intercontinental range or nuclear warheads. "Strategic" to the Soviets, can be, instead, a reference to the weapons to perform missions that can have an influence on the situation in vital sectors or theaters. "Strategic" can also refer to a set of goals that impact either on the war as a whole or upon an individual theater of military operations.

Similarly, we will have to understand what it is that the Russians mean by operational art; not with a bias that assumes that since they have one we need one, but if we can understand the Russian perspective, we should be in a

better position to develop our own plans, understand what types of forces we should procure, and more accurately prepare threat and net assessments.

# Structure of the Theory of the Navy

Figure 1



Adapted from: Morskoy Sbornik, No. 7, 1983

## NOTES

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9. Admiral V. Ponikarovskiy, "Control Theory and the History of Navies in Navy Strategy," Morskoy Sbornik, No. 3, 1983, pp. 18-23.
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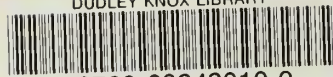
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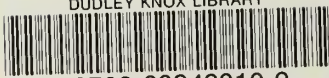


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